



#5

**ETHNOGRAPHY
AND CREATIVITY**

May 13, 2013 | 43 Comments

Big Data Needs Thick Data



Editor's Note: Tricia provides an excellent segue between last month's "Ethnomining" Special Edition and this month's on "Talking to Companies about Ethnography." She offers further thoughts building on our collective discussion (perhaps bordering on obsession?) with the big data trend. With nuance she tackles and reinvents some of the terminology circulating in the various industries that wish to make use of social research. In the wake of big data, ethnographers, she suggests, can offer thick data. In the face of derisive mention of "anecdotes" we ought to stand up to defend the value of stories.



DISCUSS:

- Big Data Needs Thick Data
- What is Coffee in Bangkok?

WHAT WERE THE INSIGHTS RELATING TO CREATIVITY?

Technology

When Machine Learning Goes Off the Rails

A guide to managing the risks by Boris Babic, I. Glenn Cohen, Theodoros Evgeniou, and Sara Gerke
From the Magazine (January-February 2019)



Images: RoboHistory.com



PSYCHOLOGY

The Dangers of Categorical Thinking

by Bart de Langhe and Philip Fernbach
From the September–October 2019 Issue

Artificial intelligence / Machine learning

Our weird behavior during the pandemic is messing with AI models

Machine-learning models trained on normal behavior are showing cracks — forcing humans to step in to set them straight.

by **Will Douglas Heaven**

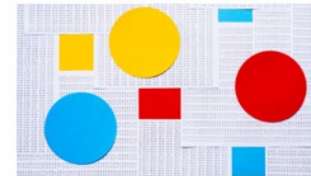
May 11, 2020

MARKETING

Why Marketing Analytics Hasn't Lived Up to Its Promise

by Carl F. Mela and Christine Moorman
May 30, 2018

Summary Save Share Comment Print Buy Copies



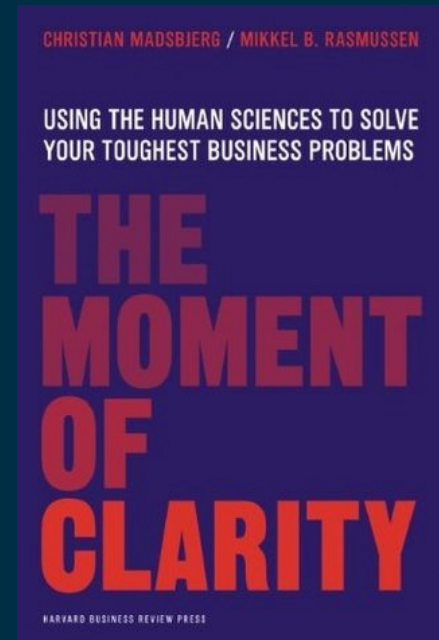
Mimg/Getty Images

Leer en español

The problem with the thinking-outside-the-box approach is neither its intention nor its tools and processes. The essential fallacy of the approach is its promise to deliver idea generation that is fast, efficient, repeatable, simple, and risk-free.

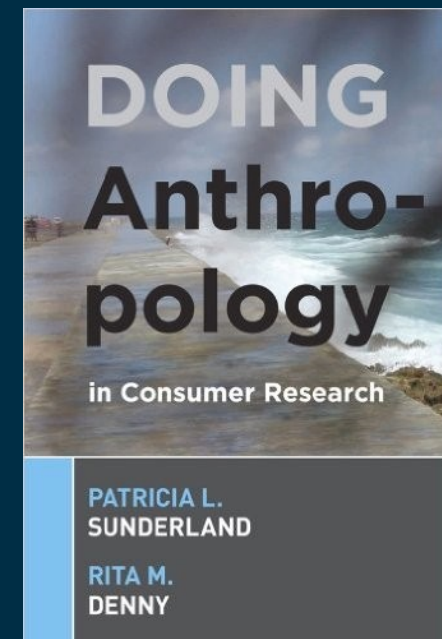
Getting people right requires a deeper investigation into human behavior as well as a longer gestation period for creative ideas. It often requires training and background knowledge or experience. And unlike the tidiness of a thinking-outside-the-box off-site workshop, it is messy.

Breakthrough insights aren't manufactured like widgets in a factory. They dawn on us in nascent form, like the sight of a vague shape on the horizon.



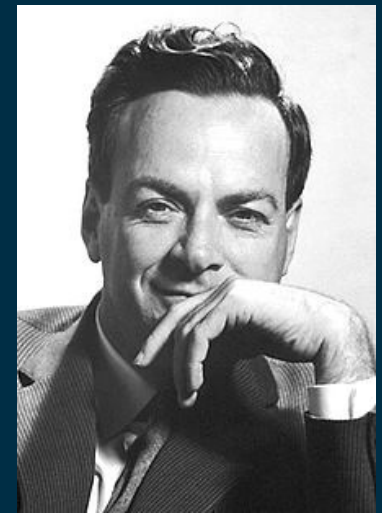
ETHNOGRAPHY

- Ethnography is a (flexible) research method that aims to produce an **illuminating account** of culture and social life in a specific social context
- Builds on multiple detailed observations of what people "actually do", but is never "just" those observations
- Participatory observation, interviews, photos, Netnography, but also statistics, surveys etc.
- Long history in marketing and consumer research (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994)



ETHNOGRAPHY AND CREATIVITY

- Ethnography is nothing if it is not creative: the production of new concepts, metaphors, or schemas for understanding social life
- Emphasis on **producing** multiple and rich perspectives (**divergence**) combined with **iteration and connecting** towards a holistic "illuminating account" (**convergence**)
- "See the familiar in the strange, and the strange in the familiar"
→ Better than "forget everything you know"
- Ethnographic virtues: tolerance of ambiguity, openness, curiosity, humility, finding the question, storytelling...
- **Creative confidence!**



“What I cannot create,
I do not understand.”

- Richard Feynman



Play at Any Cost: How Cosplayers Produce and Sustain Their Ludic Communal Consumption Experiences

ANASTASIA SEREGINA
HENRI A. WELJO

Abstract: This article examines how cosplayers produce and sustain their ludic communal consumption experiences. It explores the ways in which cosplayers create a sense of community and shared experience through their costumes and interactions at conventions. The article discusses the role of cosplay in the broader context of fan culture and the ways in which it allows individuals to express their creativity and connect with others who share their interests.



Consumer Movements and Collective Creativity: The Case of Restaurant Day

HENRI A. WELJO
DANE M. SMITH
ERIC J. ARNOLD

Abstract: This article explores the ways in which consumer movements and collective creativity are manifested in the case of Restaurant Day. It discusses the role of this event in the broader context of consumer activism and the ways in which it allows individuals to express their creativity and connect with others who share their interests.



Consumer Movements and Value Regimes: Fighting Food Waste in Germany by Building Alternative Object Pathways

JOHANNA F. GOLLNHOFFER
HENRI A. WELJO
JOHN W. SCHOUTEN

Abstract: This article examines the ways in which consumer movements and value regimes are manifested in the case of fighting food waste in Germany. It discusses the role of alternative object pathways in the broader context of consumer activism and the ways in which they allow individuals to express their creativity and connect with others who share their interests.

“SENSEMAKING IN PRACTICE”

UNDERSTANDING PROPERTIES

- Accounting for the different variables of a context, even quantifying them
- e.g., all the elements that make somebody a student of Aalto University

UNDERSTANDING ASPECTS

- Accounting for the elements that define the experience, and linking them to properties
- e.g., what is it like being a student of Aalto University
- **This is where true insights come from!**

“WHAT IS A CAMERA?”

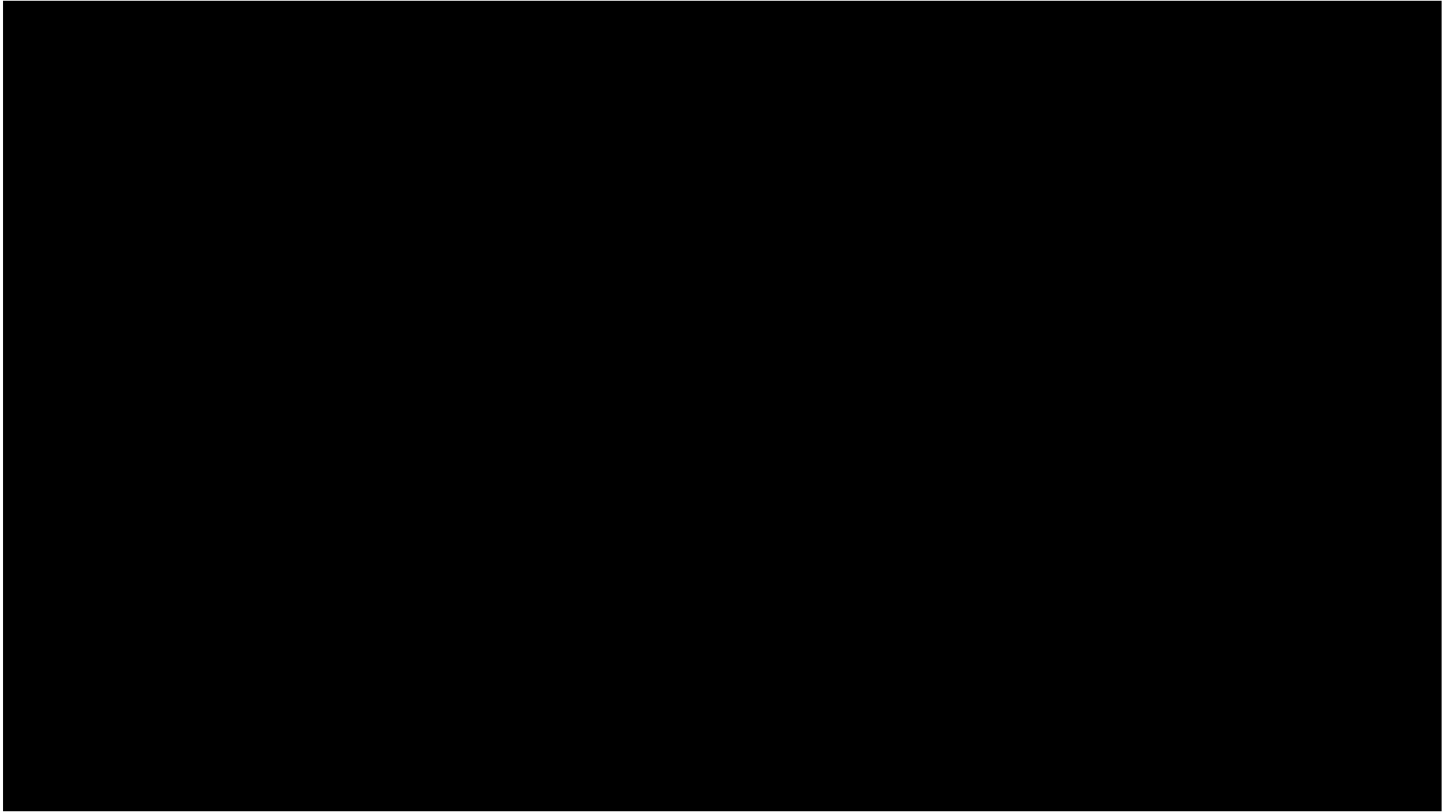


What [the company found] — **digital photography is a form of live theater for the youth culture**—was so much richer than something it might have come up at a strategy session. Business implications flowed organically: design cameras with easy tools for uploading directly to sites, and assume that because most photographs serve a kind of fluid memory bank for users, make the search function intuitive and allow them to quickly determine which photos will be permanent and which forgotten.

“FAMILIARITY”

- The taken-for-granted aspects of culture, what we constant do without thinking
- But this layer is also the most meaningful, brings everything together
- Critically accessing this “layer” of knowledge is difficult
- **For example, what are student overalls?**





WHAT ARE BACHELOR(ETTE) PARTIES ABOUT?



- *Transition ritual; intense abandoning of “singlehood” and preparation of marriage self*
- *Celebration of the past*
- *Affirming existing social bonds; creating new ones*
- *Gender: both intensification (esp. men) and inversion (esp. women)*
- *Self-parody and self-destruction; staged humiliations*
- *The wedding’s “shadow”*





CASE EXAMPLE:

MOOMIN MUG COLLECTORS

Question:

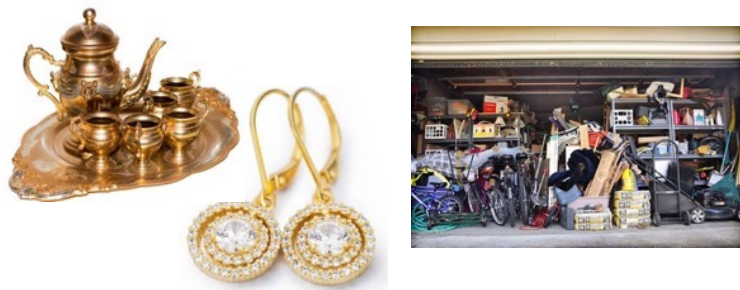
What is Moomin mug collecting “about”?



Not a Collection / In Use



Not a Collection / Not In Use

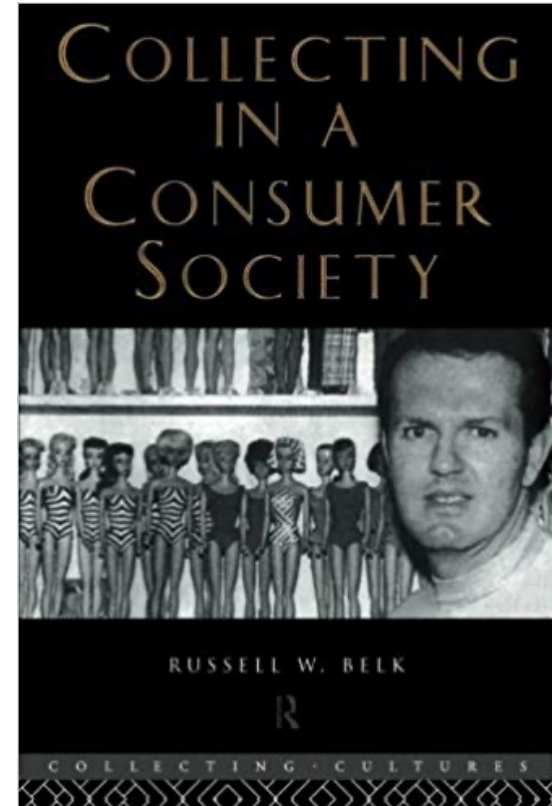


Collection / Not In Use



Collections and Collecting

- First item typically a gift
- Accidental start to collecting
- Category fidelity
- Rule of no-two-alike
- Sacralization; items removed from *original intended use*



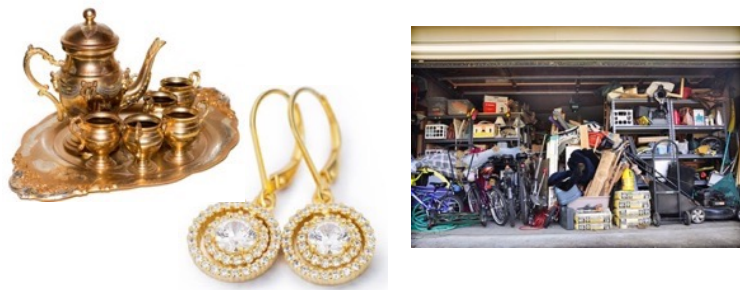
Not a Collection / In Use



Collection / In Use



Not a Collection / Not In Use



Collection / Not In Use



“What makes a collection usable?”



Layered Object Affordances

- Growing the collection justified through “everyday usefulness and small joys” (Miller 2008)
- Tempering of desires
- Managing family identity
- Liquidity, in a fiduciary sense!
- “Second lives” of broken items



“You feel safe, somehow. It’s nice that not everything has to be so real, I mean you have this topic [Moomins] that makes you think that even though the world can be tough, you can feel safe. You can use children’s mugs if you want to.” (Jarkko)

“You could probably spend your money on worse things than this. At least these things can be used. Even though I have spent a lot of money on these, they have brought so much joy. Everyday, practical joy... I mean if you collect coffee grinders or drinking bottles and put them next to your wall, well that can of course be pleasant to look at, but they won’t necessarily bring you any more joy than that. These bring practical joy.” (Maria)



When I started to have rarer mugs, I was so sure that I would keep them unused. I thought that I wouldn't even remove the stickers or anything... But then one time I just started thinking 'why on earth do I store these?' These are meant to be used. Even though I collect these and it's nice to keep them clean, especially the rare ones, I just thought that it doesn't make sense to just let them get dusty in the cabinet. That's why I eventually moved all of them into use. (Niina)

"The size of the mugs is suitable, and they fit well your hand. They are also easy to keep clean and they don't break easily. Not many of them have become broken. Maybe two or three... But these are like multi-purpose mugs. They can be used as coffee mugs or juice mugs or milk mugs. They are multi-use and easy to use mugs." (Maria)

"We drink our morning coffees from these as well as evening juices and water—we use these all the time." (Sanna)



Layered Object Affordances: Modes of Using

- Emotional routines and rituals
- Ludic sociality
- Meaningful events



Emotional Routines

“It’s like, if I want to cheer myself up, I just walk in front of the mugs and I choose the one, which makes me feel happier. For example, this mug here (shows a yellow Moomin mug). If it’s a gray autumn day, this one makes me feel good.” (Jarkko)

“I’m always feeling like Little My. Always in a way. I think that I’m like brisk and raffish and that. At least I try to be like that every day and somehow, I think that this Little My like cheers me up. And this yellow color is quite perky, so it probably also has an effect.” (Emma)

“I sometimes stand there for multiple minutes picking the right mug, one that fits that moment’s mood... The mugs bring small joys to your daily life. Instead of picking a dull, grey or black mug, you pick one that cheers you up.” (Aija)



Emotional Routines

“I have received one mug as a gift. It is the black Moominpappa mug. It has a fishing theme and I received it as a gift in 2005 or something like that and because fishing is important to me, it was for a long time that I only drank from that mug in those mornings, when I was planning to go fishing.” (Jarkko)

“If it’s a cleaning day then I always, and everybody laughs at me when I do so, take a Fillyjonk mug.” (Maria)



Ludic Sociality

“We have a habit with our friends that they have to choose their own Moomin mug from these and after that they have to explain why they have chosen the specific mug. Just like you [the interviewer] had to do.” (Elli)

“If I give someone a mug, I choose which one I give. If I have been fighting with my husband, I give him a Groke mug or a Stinky mug...and I have a friend, who is a class teacher and she is quite strict, so I always give her a Fillyjonk mug. She has probably not even realized that I always give her that mug.” (Saara)



Meaningful Events

“Our wedding was at Rami’s mum’s and her partner’s place and it was basically a garden party in Lappeenranta. It was in the summer two years ago. We borrowed some Moomin mugs from Rami’s mom and from my mom to complement my Moomin mug collection. We had something like forty-five guests and somehow these just suited that party so well too. In my opinion these bring warmth to a normal everyday table, coffee table, and party table. In parties it is not just dry and official. These make them a little more relaxed” (Elli)



Meaningful Events

“Christmas eves are special, when my and my husband’s parents come over for the holidays, we always drink glög from Moomin mugs. It has to be the Moomin mugs from which we drink... Similarly, our children’s birthdays, the mugs have always been there.”
(Sanna)



Second lives of broken mugs



“I got excited about Moomin jewelries after I saw my friends Facebook post in which she had made jewelry of broken Moomin mugs and dishes... She told me that she makes them by using a glass grinding machine and I thought that I also want to try so I bought myself a glass grinding machine from Tori.fi...I have collected the material from friends and from trash pallet group and where ever I happen to get the material. The word has spread pretty well so that people know that also broken Moomin dishes are wanted possessions. Consequently, people don't necessarily throw them away anymore” (Minna)

Rotational Placement

- Rotating between use and non-use states
- Temporal rhythms of rotations
- Rotations and epistemicity
- Negotiation of storage spaces, not just the “sacred shrine”





”Cooling
area”



”Launch
pad”

Temporal Rhythms of Rotations

”In the beginning of December, when Christmas time comes, I move all of these winter Moomin mugs to the lower shelf and we use them until the end of February. After that I move them back in the back of the cabinet again.” (Paula)

“When it’s summer, I put these summer mugs to the front and I move these mugs in the cupboard, so that we would not always use the same ones...And these are, for example, winterlike mugs, and these I will soon move to the front, because we always use those ones that are in the front.” (Saara)



Temporal Rhythms of Rotations

Jarkko: My wife and I go to the vitrine and try to think which mugs would be nice right now. Then we take twelve mugs into use and those mugs that are currently in the kitchen cabinet go back to the vitrine after they are washed.

Interviewer: How long do the mugs stay in the kitchen cabinet?

Jarkko: Maybe two or three weeks. But it's not that strict.

“I have moved the rarer and more expensive [mugs] to the higher shelves... so that they could avoid heavy use.” (Sanna)



Rotating and Epistemicity

“And because we always change a new set of mugs into use it is very delightful to use something when you realize that ‘ah yes, I also have this in here.’ And somehow you can always find new details from them and sometimes even become surprised like oh wow, it has also this kind of thing. It’s kind of funny, because you think that you already know all of the designs.” (Jarkko)

“I have gotten so fed up with these sometimes that I have packed them away for a bit... But, whenever they find their way back into use again, then you’re like ‘hey, these are so cool again!’... And when I found out about these Facebook trading rings, that got me excited about collecting Moomin mugs all over again.... I have traded away mugs that I had gotten bored with or no longer liked.” (Aija)



Circulation and Shared Possession

“Every spring and fall when people in the Moomin mug collector group start drumming up speculation about the themes for this year, spring, or fall, then you yourself get into it and head to the official website to check whether or not they’ve made any updates... [the groups are] full of anticipation... And they give you this belief that someday even I might find a rare mug for one euro or something. [laughs]” (Aija)



Circulation and Shared Possession

“I know that I collect a lot, too, but I am not obsessed because I can choose what I want or take. I don’t have to have everything.... I only collect those items that I like... I’m not collecting just for the sake of collecting... I’ve also thought that you might one day make some money out of them, like a real financial benefit.” (Tarja)

- Family unities and loose boundaries between collections
- Co-storage of collections
- Strategic use of “spares”
- Second-hand market speculation



Question:

So what would you do
with these findings?
(Marketing? Design?)



Ethnography—
where to start
and what
should I notice?



SPRADLEY'S MATRIX

- A big part, especially for novice ethnographer, is to know “what I should be noticing” → **again: creative confidence absolutely essential**
- This often leads to a) limiting the breadth of one’s observations, and b) “overplaying” the few observations one does make
- Spradley’s (1980) ethnographic matrix is a great starting tool:
“You will make descriptive observations whenever you look at a social situation and try to record as much as possible. It means approaching the activity in process without any particular question in mind, but only the general question, “What is going on here?”” (Spradley, 1980, p. 73)

	SPACE	OBJECT	ACT	ACTIVITY	EVENT	TIME	ACTOR	GOAL	FEELING
SPACE	Can you describe in detail all the <i>places</i> ?	What are all the ways space is organized by objects?	What are all the ways space is organized by acts?	What are all the ways space is organized by activities?	What are all the ways space is organized by events?	What spatial changes occur over time?	What are all the ways space is used by actors?	What are all the ways space is related to goals?	What places are associated with feelings?
OBJECT	Where are objects located?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>objects</i> ?	What are all the ways objects are used in acts?	What are all the ways objects are used in activities?	What are all the ways objects are used in events?	How are objects used at different times?	What are all the ways objects are used by actors?	How are objects used in seeking goals?	What are all the ways objects evoke feelings?
ACT	Where do the acts occur?	How do acts incorporate the use of objects?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>acts</i> ?	How are acts a part of activities?	How are acts a part of events?	How do acts vary over time?	What are the ways acts are performed by actors?	What are all the ways acts are related to goals?	What are all the ways acts are linked to feelings?
ACTIVITY	What are all the places activities occur?	What are all the ways activities incorporate objects?	What are all the ways activities incorporate acts?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>activities</i> ?	What are all the ways activities are part of events?	How do activities vary at different times?	What are all the ways activities involve actors?	What are all the ways activities involve goals?	How do activities involve feelings?
EVENT	What are all the places events occur?	What are all the ways events incorporate objects?	What are all the ways events incorporate acts?	What are all the ways events incorporate activities?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>events</i> ?	How do events occur over time? Is there any sequencing?	How do events involve the various actors?	How are events related to goals?	How do events involve feelings?
TIME	Where do time periods occur?	What are all the ways time affects objects?	How do acts fall into time periods?	How do activities fall into time periods?	How do events fall into time periods?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>time periods</i> ?	When are all the times actors are "on stage"?	How are goals related to time periods?	When are feelings evoked?
ACTOR	Where do actors place themselves?	What are all the ways actors use objects?	What are all the ways actors use acts?	How are actors involved in activities?	How are actors involved in events?	How do actors change over time or at different times?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>actors</i> ?	Which actors are linked to which goals?	What are the feelings experienced by actors?
GOAL	Where are goals sought and achieved?	What are all the ways goals involved use of objects?	What are all the ways goals involve acts?	What activities are goal seeking or linked to goals?	What are all the ways events are linked to goals?	Which goals are scheduled for which times?	How do the various goals affect the various actors?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>goals</i> ?	What are all the ways goals evoke feelings?
FEELING	Where do the various feeling states occur?	What feelings lead to the use of what objects?	What are all the ways feelings affect acts?	What are all the ways feelings affect activities?	What are all the ways feelings affect events?	How are feelings related to various time periods?	What are all the ways feelings involve actors?	What are the ways feelings influence goals?	Can you describe in detail all the <i>feelings</i> ?

Ethnography—
look for
ethnographic
studies related
to your topic!

